

# The shared use of the cityscape. Revisiting the extraordinary case of SoHo



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## Resumen

Este artículo examina el fenómeno cultural y urbano que aconteció en SoHo como el principal incitador de una relación sin precedentes y de beneficio mutuo entre arte y ciudad. Esta fue la primera experiencia deliberada de este tipo que resultaría en un modelo innovador de vida urbana basado en la cooperación de una comunidad de artistas a través de la interacción con el espacio obsoleto existente en la Ciudad de Nueva York. Este artículo explora el desarrollo de las prácticas espaciales de los artistas de SoHo sobre este territorio principalmente durante los primeros años de la década de 1970. El tejido industrial olvidado de SoHo convergió con fuerzas artísticas revolucionarias y generó un producto urbano pionero, el “distrito artístico”. No obstante, la notable cantidad de incursiones artísticas, apropiaciones urbanas y actos de colaboración se concretarían también en otros aprendizajes de menor escala, procedimientos singulares y estratégicos que inspirarían el trabajo en la ciudad de artistas en décadas posteriores. SoHo sería el preludio, el punto de partida, de un arte con responsabilidad urbana y social que se ha revelado hoy de gran interés para aquellos pensadores urbanos que buscan maneras de construir una ciudad más creativa e incluyente.

## Palabras clave

SoHo  
New York City  
participación  
regeneración urbana  
espacio alternativo  
contracultura artística

## Abstract

This article reviews SoHo's cultural and urban phenomenon as the main promoter of an unprecedented mutually beneficial relationship between art and city. This was the first deliberated experience of its kind, resulting in an innovative model of urban life based on the cooperation of a community of artists through the interaction with existing obsolete space in New York City. This article explores the development of the spatial practices by the artists of SoHo throughout this area primarily during the early 1970s. SoHo's forgotten industrial fabric converged with revolutionary artistic forces and generated a groundbreaking urban product, the “art district”. Nonetheless, the number of art incursions, urban appropriations and collective acts would also

## Key words

SoHo  
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urban regeneration  
alternative space  
artistic counterculture

conclude in other small scale learning, unique and strategic procedures that inspired the artists' works in the city over the following decades. SoHo would be the prelude, the starting point for an art with urban and social responsibility, which is revealed today of great interest for those city thinkers who seek ways to build a more creative and inclusive city.

## The shared use of the cityscape. The case of SoHo

In 1972, it was still almost impossible to move around SoHo on workdays. (...)

A few minutes after five o'clock in the afternoon, SoHo is suddenly empty. The trucks have disappeared, so have the mobile ramps. Only the industrial trash remains lying around. It is time for SoHo's other life to start, that of the artists. The Spring Street Bar and Ken's Bar on Groome Street start to fill. SoHo's secret population leaves its lofts. (...) In this evening hush, the streets with their cast-iron work palaces have an even more pronounced air of unreality. Details of the architecture and overall architectural conception are revealed. (...) An urban building-block landscape, which might have had its origin in a child's imagination.

(René Block, "Square Map SoHo. Europe in SoHo. Alex—or the Spirit of SoHo," *New York-Downtown Manhattan: SoHo* (1976: 101, 104))

SoHo is a unique area within the neighborhood network of New York City. As the writer E. B. White already observed in the 1940s in his visionary *Here is New York*, Manhattan was a "composite of tens of thousands of tiny neighborhood units" and each neighborhood was almost "self-sufficient" (White, 1949, 2011: 34-35). Although SoHo was not a residential area with the characteristic facilities of these communities, it was symbolically and functionally autonomous, a distinct piece of the urban fabric. The area had maintained its clear boundaries thanks to its honest architecture, which responded only to the logic of work and production –warehouses, manufacturing houses, retail stores, and small businesses. As the city had grown northward, this industrial sector had occupied a central position in the Island, as an island within the island. Over time, this district gradually became devoid of color. Its industrial activity was minimized, as was its importance in the operation of the mid 20th century city. Almost akin to a ghost town, it combined emptiness with any remaining anachronistic activities, persisting as a reminder of a past time when large, almost overcrowded, workforces carried out exhausting activities that mechanically pushed the city forward. The scars on floors and walls, the coarse dust of façades, dimly lit streets and tons of waste materials all continued to speak of the "working" spirit of this settlement for production. This detached mechanical heart of sorts would be rediscovered and reused by adventurous artists who would reinterpret its geography in advanced collaborative ways. They would reveal its potential and symbolic value, promoting its preservation as city landmark, and its dissemination as paradigm of the contemporary cultural industry. How did "fiction" and "function" coexist within the same urban structures?

1976 saw Berlin host a major exhibition about SoHo, *New York-Downtown Manhattan: SoHo*, which showed the increasing influence of this artistic and urban phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The catalog, published by the Berlin Akademie der Künste and the Berliner Festwochen, collected essays about SoHo by René Block, Lawrence Alloway, Stephen Koch, Peter Frank, Lucy Lippard, Douglas Davis, Stephen B. Reichard and Joan La Barbara. It is one of the most complete documents dating back to when the idea of SoHo was taking shape. This selection of accounts has been used to outline the following description, providing an idea of how SoHo was perceived at the beginning of the 1970s.

1. *New York-Downtown Manhattan: SoHo* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1976) was an illustrated exhibition catalog published by the Akademie der Künste and the Berliner Festwochen in conjunction with the three-part exhibition *New York-Downtown Manhattan: Soho*, September 5 - October 17, 1976.



Cover of the catalog *New York-Downtown Manhattan: SoHo*. Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1976. Photograph by the author.

This article presents the process of art colonization, as well as the spatial practices and participatory procedures of the early years of SoHo that would establish an unprecedented relationship between artists, citizens and contexts. Therefore, and in order to fully understand the motivations of such phenomena, the urban and art history of this part of the city will be addressed under the following epigraphs:

- I. Working art in workspaces.
- II. Creative clustering.
- III. Alternative art spaces.
- IV. Urban geographies of art.
- V. Learning from SoHo.

### **I. Working Art in Workspaces**

Much of the art produced in the 1970s showcased an unprecedented humanity, a heightened awareness of the living conditions of the men and women of this generation. Although this article does not aim to specifically address the political involvement of artists, it is worth noting the determination of a great number of creators in dignifying mankind and the artistic profession by clearly displaying their work efforts in specialized locations. Thus, the popular artists' group *Art "Workers" Coalition* referred to the artistic process as "work" (Lippard, 1970: 10-19). Working art in "workspaces", men and women would find a way to identify their practices with recognizable productive activities occurring in the city. In this regard, given that the SoHo area was conceived as an ode to work for "industrial production" it was to serve as a suitable scenario for gestating this new "symbolic production". In other words, although it might seem contradictory, members of the alternative movement used the pre-established functional spaces of the city, also envisioning certain urban functionality in art. Therefore, the message of SoHo could also be that, given that art was born from the old productive apparatus which supplied the city, art should be also considered a "basic social need". In addition to this conceptual approach, the new art needed large and flexible spaces to be conceived, built, and experienced on a



*Aerial view of Manhattan Island and the area of SoHo. Photograph by Yorshige Saito, 1973. Source: El Mundo en que Vivimos. Vol. 1. La Tierra -Regiones Polares. Barcelona: Instituto Gallach de Librería y Ediciones, S.L. (1973).*



*View from the World Trade Center from the catalog New York-Downtown Manhattan: SoHo, 1976. Source: New York-Downtown Manhattan: SoHo (1976:2).*

proper scale, and required sites which allowed connections to the urban and social matrix of cities, at least in part. SoHo's "industrial cathedrals" could offer all that, and were to become –both in concept and form– one of the most suitable places for the inquiries of contemporary art.<sup>2</sup>

The industrial arena of SoHo was configured from the mid 19th century onwards. At the time, this area covering 26 blocks south of Houston Street was the center of urban life and contained the city's major stores and services. Toward the end of the century, its middle class residents moved uptown following the example of wealthy families who were settling into their new mansions above 30th Street, along Fifth Avenue. The

2. In numerous publications from this period critics and art workers expressed their general discontent regarding the traditional mechanisms of representation and symbolic production in cities, and SoHo was also part of this debate. Although the reasons for SoHo's occupation -including the desire to cover vital needs for an overpopulation of artists in a time of crisis- were very diverse, one of the original objectives was also the transformation of the urban symbolic experience in cities (the meaning and structure of museums, galleries, monuments and landmarks). Figures including Robert Smithson expressed their preoccupation regarding official cultural settings and the importance of industrial sites as an alternative in this regard (Smithson, 1996: 41-42).



Cover of the book *Cast-Iron Architecture In New York: a Photographic Survey*. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1974. Photograph by the author.

abandoned neighborhoods quickly deteriorated and houses were transformed and divided to obtain smaller apartments for lower-income residents. Due to the increasing decline of the area, from 1879, these residential units were replaced by loft buildings for commercial and manufacturing businesses (Hudson, 1987: 22). During the industrialization era, cloth and leather factories would locate their headquarters in this area. Furthermore, the architectural development of this South Houston Street Industrial Area was to be very innovative, and would become essential to configuring the urban character of the contemporary city. In fact, its unique cast-iron buildings would become the emblem of a “modern” America. James Borgadus’s invention led to an abundance of incredibly expressive industrial settings. Using prefabrication and serial production, he combined in these 19th century constructions the industrial production logic of nascent capitalism with symbolic recreations of ancient Europe, including gargoyles and Corinthian columns, embodying the American “work and business” ethic (Gayle, 1998: 75-86).<sup>3</sup>

None of the first cast-iron buildings by Borgadus survived the mid 1970s. The creative-destructive wheel of Manhattan had also affected these pioneering constructions which already featured in the first list of New York City landmarks drawn up by the *Municipal Art Society* (Andrews, 1963). In fact, in the early 1970s, these cast-iron constructions were in decline, doomed to become mere memories of the industrial era. In response to this, historic preservationist Margot Gayle headed the New York branch of the national association *Friends of Cast-Iron Architecture* from 1969, wishing to provide a record of New York cast-iron architecture. Aware of the risk of their impending demise, she produced a study on these particular buildings throughout New York City, published in 1974, along with a companion photographic survey by Edmund V. Gillon Jr., *Cast-Iron Architecture In New York*.<sup>4</sup> The greatest concentration of cast-iron architecture in the city was to be found in the SoHo area. One of the earliest examples of commercial buildings there was A. T Stewart’s 18 Mercer Street, erected by one of

3. The earliest cast-iron constructions were Borgadus’s own factory on Center Street, Dr. John Milhau’s iron-fronted pharmacy, 183 Broadway, and Edgar Laing’s row of five stores. The exuberant ornamentation of these façades that conferred them with a unique palatial character was soon applied in cast iron to commercial and industrial buildings. The Italian Renaissance palazzo style then gave way to a High Victorian Italianate, which brought with it taller windows and new decoration features, and a French Second Empire mode, which added peaks and domes to roofs (Gayle, 1998).

4. This publication is based on a complete inventory of New York City cast-iron buildings carried out by the national group *Friends of Cast-Iron Architecture*, which used the information compiled by a group of students from Pennsylvania State University College of Arts and Architecture in 1971. The documentation was provided to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, geared toward designating and subsequently preserving SoHo as Historic District.



SoHo, 2014. Photograph by the author. Source: Author's Personal Collection.

Borgadus's biggest competitors, Daniel Badger's *Architectural Iron Works*. SoHo was made up of streets with buildings placed side by side, four to six stories tall, and with exposed cast-iron façades that were usually painted in light colors. These fronts hid conventional structures with brick walls, wooden beams, and wooden floors. This configuration allowed for very open interiors with high ceilings and large windows.

SoHo was an industrial area, designed exclusively as a complex of "workspaces" boosted mainly by the immigrant labor force housed in the Lower East Side. It is difficult now to imagine how degrading this area must have been for manufacturing workers. Thousands of immigrants were trapped in these elegant cages, working at least fourteen-hour days. From the 1870s until World War I, this area was economically successful. However, following the relocation of the manufacturing nucleus uptown where trade was then concentrated, the workers also moved up. This displacement was also a direct consequence of the opening of major subway lines in 1904 and the 1912 inauguration of Pennsylvania Railroad Station in New York City (Hudson, 1986: 22). "Between 1920 and 1950 (with a small reprieve caused by the mobilization during World War II), SoHo significantly declined as a viable commercial and industrial area. To many it began to be considered an anachronism in Manhattan's economy (...) Some buildings had only few tenants, other were boarded up, and still others had been razed and replaced by parking lots. A number of its building spaces were occasionally used for a variety of temporary activities, such as selling distressed merchandise or seasonal goods like Christmas decorations" (Hudson, 1987: 23). According to Chester Rapkin's revealing 1963 survey, *The South Houston Industrial Area*, the vacant workspaces began to host new establishments for "low value paper" and "textiles wastes" (Rapkin, 1963: 105). Certainly, SoHo's new activities involved the recycling of industrial products to obtain low-cost merchandise, a unique and valuable economy for the city that future tenants –the artists– would undoubtedly appreciate.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1960s, before the bulk of the artistic community moved to this area SoHo was a "19th century industrial desert", as observed by Stephen Koch (1976: 111). According to the *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, between 1963 and 1973, New York City lost 220,000 manufacturing jobs, a 25% decrease which brought about the closure of many production spaces (Eckstein, 1981: 511). Given that the area was zoned as industrial –until

5. The working logic of the place was also to contribute to art production. Junk merchants and secondhand shops around Canal Street were the suppliers of choice for pioneer artists and inventors in the area –including art group *Fluxus* which would also have its *Fluxshop* at number 359 (Koch, 1976: 121).



*Truck in SoHo. Mercer Street, Broome Street. Photograph by Carin Drechsler-Marx. Source: New York-Downtown Manhattan: SoHo (1976: 98).*

1971 it was legally zoned for small industry, shipping, and warehouses only—, it remained a decadent island between the skyscrapers of Midtown and those of Downtown. In the twentieth century, it was known as “The Valley” and also became known as “Hell’s Hundred Acres” because of the numerous blazes occurring there. In this stagnation, this area was under threat from renewal processes. Proposals were made for the creation of new middle- and upper-income housing for the white-collar workers of the new offices downtown. The area was also affected by the expansion of New York University, the entertainment dynamics of Greenwich Village—as analyzed by Sally Banes—and the office boom taking place in Lower Manhattan (Eckstein, 1981: 518). Nonetheless, the work of cast-iron defender Margot Gayle and the public protests of urban thinker Jane Jacobs were evidence of the increasing appreciation for New York’s industrial heritage at this time.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the working spirit of the artists arriving in SoHo was also contributing to social awareness of this urban environment by providing its valuable cast-iron workspaces with new meaning.

Artists were definitely adding to their sense of self as “workers” in SoHo. In fact, they were multi-purpose workers. By working as carpenters or plumbers able to repair or adapt any loft space, they were able to earn a living that allowed them to pursue their true work, artistic production. Without a doubt, the numerous and diverse jobs carried out within the same boundaries greatly enriched artistic practice. At the time, in SoHo artists found what they believed to be a natural setting for their current concerns, namely, a place that facilitated the utilization of collective procedures, the erasure of traces of authorship, the integration of marginalized social groups, the use of common places, familiar materials and social references, all that had come to be known as the democratization of art. René Block stated “This peaceful coexistence of workers and artists appeared to me like the fulfillment of European dreams. For the artists, these surroundings were ideal. Not only the big new work spaces in the factory lofts, but also the equable, neutral atmosphere of the working scene made for a down-to-earth attitude and adjustment to their own work” (Block, 1976: 102-103). Block especially

6. These buildings in SoHo embodied a great invention toward modern skyscraper construction, toward the modern America. As Philip Johnson explained in the foreword of another of Gayle’s important publication on the matter, *Cast-Iron Architecture in America. The significance of James Borgadus*, 1998. “When the International Style arrived here in the 30s, we Americans were ready. The Crystal Palace was on our minds, of course, but what was new was modules of iron and steel applied as curtain walls, which came to us directly, indigenously if you will, from James Borgadus” (Gayle, 1997: 7).

highlighted the opportunity that this work ethic in SoHo afforded European immigrants. Many artists, who had arrived in New York escaping European conflicts and precariousness, had led the city's art scene for years. The 1970s crises and devaluation of the dollar favored European artists. In 1968, after Paula Cooper opened the first gallery in SoHo at 96 Prince Street, several European art dealers and galleries also set up at around this time, including *Duffy and Sons* at 157 Spring Street or *René Block Gallery* at 409 West Broadway in 1974. This urban area became the arena for "the new European liberality". According to Block, SoHo was as far away from the rest of Manhattan as it was from old Europe (1976: 43-91). However, in the 1960s the New York uptown galleries and the general art scene were dominated and absorbed by American art. This sort of nationalism shifted the focus away from the work of European artists residing in the city. Attracted by the low rents and the characteristic atmosphere of social inclusion through collective work, these artists would find in SoHo their dreamland.<sup>7</sup>

The scope of these artists' urban behavior was such that it would challenge the city's pattern of development based on "destruction for creation". The clustering of art workspaces combined with heritage awareness promoted by organizations like Gayle's would lead to the approval of the first *Loft Law* between 1964 and 1971. This law officially revaluated these settings for industrial production as places for symbolic production and allowed artists to become their new workers. This regulation on the use of lofts by artists for living and working, was followed by SoHo's classification as a *Historic District* in 1973 and the subsequent preservation of the unique Victorian cast-iron architecture of these workspaces (Gayle, 1998: 16). Somehow, the American production logic which had always guided the city was also perpetuated within these workspaces for art, to the point that this association between art and industry would also bring substantial profit for the future city. As Stephen Koch would say, "On the site of America's first attempt to express its 'modernity', the American avant-garde has located itself, the spirit of 'modernity' renewed" (Koch, 1976: 117).

## II. Creative clustering

It is difficult to provide an accurate description of the pioneering cases of occupation of industrial lofts. Artists quickly noted that the great size of these spaces and the high load-bearing capacities of their floors allowed a wider range of art practices than in any other conventional art setting. The artists at Coenties Slip, precursors of Pop Art and Minimalism, were among the first to use industrial spaces for living and creating in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, there were also artists using lofts sporadically in SoHo –in fact, Robert Rauschenberg already had his studio on Fulton Street in 1952.

Nevertheless, SoHo as a "phenomenon" began with the significant artistic invasion occurring in the late 1960s. James R. Hudson, professor of social science and sociology at Pennsylvania State University, used an ingenious method to confirm the hidden process used to take over these buildings. He analyzed the occupation of the 403 local constructions cataloged as lofts by the Real Property Assessment Department of the City of New York using the telephone records for each building. He measured the number of residential telephone lines for each loft building from 1965 to 1977. The data showed the gradual usage of the buildings and their stories, which were usually five or six per building. Hudson observes, "These data indicate not only a growing population of residents but also a growing concentration of residential tenants in individual buildings – a measure of increasing residential density within these buildings. The patterns appear to show that once a building was opened to conversion, there was a process of residential succession within the building itself (...). By the end of the period studied, there were 914 residential telephones in 224 SoHo loft buildings; i.e., approximately 56 percent of

7. European art would dominate this city scene until "New York stole the idea of Modern Art" from Paris in the late 1940s. According to art critic Clement Greenberg, New York was the epicenter, the appropriate context for the revival of the avant-garde, (Guilbaut, 2007: 313-321). See Clement Greenberg, "The Situation at the Moment," *Partisan Review*, 5 (January 1948), and "The Decline of Cubism" *Partisan Review* n. 3 (March 1948),

8. The group, which was not considered an artistic movement itself, was set up by James Rosenquist, Robert Indiana, Jack Youngerman, Lenore Tawney, Fred Mitchell, Charles Hinman, Ann Wilson, Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly. They occupied a strip of publishing and printing industries which had resisted the processes of urban renewal in Lower Manhattan (Stratton, 1977: 24).

Table 2.3 Distribution and Ratio of Residential Telephones in SoHo Loft Buildings, 1965–77

Year	Residential Telephones	Buildings with Residential Telephones	Ratio of Residential Telephones to Buildings
1965	100	54	1.85:1
1967	127	63	2.03:1
1969	267	104	2.58:1
1971	357	131	2.72:1
1973	511	166	3.08:1
1975	712	204	3.49:1
1977	914	224	4.08:1

Table 2.4 Distribution of Residential Telephones in SoHo Loft Buildings, 1965–77

Telephones per Building	1965 (N=54)	1967 (N=63)	1969 (N=104)	1971 (N=131)	1973 (N=166)	1975 (N=204)	1977 (N=224)
1	53.7%	44.4%	33.7%	32.1%	30.1%	23.0%	14.3%
2	29.6	27.0	24.0	23.7	18.7	17.6	17.9
3	9.3	14.3	21.2	21.4	19.9	19.1	18.3
4	3.7	11.1	10.6	9.9	10.2	13.2	14.7
5	1.9	3.2	4.8	6.1	6.6	9.8	12.5
6	0	0	1.0	0	7.8	7.4	5.4
7	0	0	1.9	3.8	1.2	2.0	6.3
8	0	0	0	0	3.0	4.9	4.0
9	0	0	2.9	1.5	0.6	1.0	2.7
10	0	0	0	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.9
11	1.9	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	0	0	0	0	0.6	0	1.3
13	0	0	0	0	0	0.5	0.4
14	0	0	0	0.8	0.6	0.5	1.3
15	0	0	0	0	0	0.5	0

N = buildings

Tables on the Distribution of Residential Telephones in SoHo Loft Buildings. Source: *The Unanticipated City. Loft Conversion in Lower Manhattan* (1987: 36).

the loft buildings in SoHo had residential tenants” (Hudson, 1987: 36). However, this process of artistic invasion did not eliminate all commercial and industrial activities. Instead, SoHo became a prosperous mixed-use district.

One of the most important precursors of SoHo’s artistic invasion was artist George Maciunas, leader of the well-known group *Fluxus*, which concentrated most of its activity between Houston and Canal Street. In his text for the catalog *New York-Downtown Manhattan: Soho*, Peter Frank highlighted the importance of this collective in the invention of the “loft lifestyle” around SoHo (Frank, 1976: 151- 179). In the mid 1960s, Maciunas conceived a co-operative loft ownership model to facilitate the access of artists to these obsolete industrial workspaces. He called it the *Fluxhouse Cooperative* (1965-1968). This project was initially supported by the J. M. Kaplan Fund and the National Foundation for the Arts, which were also interested in the incipient reutilization of industrial buildings by New York artists. Maciunas’s system allowed artists to acquire large and, therefore, expensive spaces that would have been beyond their means otherwise. He used cooperatives in order to organize artists into groups, joining forces to negotiate with the landlords. Once the deal closed, the loft building usually required a minimum transformation that generally entailed its division into smaller units, measuring approximately 300 square meters each. By 1968, eleven *Fluxhouses* had been created in SoHo.

### Fluxhouse Cooperatives, 1965-1968

George Maciunas was a meticulous urban explorer aware of the large number of factories and manufacturing companies shutting down in this area. Since a five or



Article of the New York Times  
 "The Irascible father of SoHo" by  
 Christopher Gray about George  
 Maciunas, 1992. Source: Collection  
 of the Municipal Art Society.

six-story building was unaffordable and too large for the activities of a single artist Maciunas came up with the idea of creating “co-op lofts”. This structure meant that artists would only need to pay the rent for one story, a solution considered far more realistic. Maciunas’s project was backed by the J. M. Kaplan Fund and the National Foundation for the Arts, which had set up a joint venture for experimenting in artists’ housing. They wanted to fight the M-1 zoning designation, which excluded residential occupancy in areas of light manufacturing, and Maciunas provided a possible solution to overcome this limitation. According to urban sociologist Charles R. Simpson “Maciunas established himself as the president of *Fluxhouse Cooperatives, Inc.*, in order to ‘perform all the organizational work’ involved in forming cooperatives, purchasing buildings, obtaining mortgages, obtaining legal and architectural services, conducting work as a general contractor for all renovation and [handling the] future management if so desired by the members” (Simpson, 1981: 153-188). Maciunas came up with an innovative procedure for loft conversion which brought about the speedy artistic “invasion” analyzed by James R. Hudson.

In 1966, he selected the first building at 80-82 Wooster Street. It was a 1985 seven-story Renaissance-style warehouse building originally designed by Gilbert Schellenger and first owned by the real estate firm Boehm and Coon. Simpson told of how “in the summer of 1967, with \$20,000 from the Kaplan Fund and the Foundation, Maciunas was able to make the cash down payment on this \$105,000 building. As was to be the pattern with other SoHo cooperatives, the former owner assumed the mortgage for the balance owed. With \$20,000 in grants, Maciunas was able to offer spaces for only \$2,000 cash down per shareholder, using the money for renovations and charging initially only \$205 per month maintenance for 3,300 square feet [306 square meters]” (Simpson, 1981: 153-188). His next project was to be at 16-18 Greene Street. However, without the support of the Federal Housing Administration or changes expected in the zoning codes, Maciunas encountered major problems. Shael Shapiro, an architect who worked closely with the artists in the area, assisted Maciunas and acted as consultant for many cooperatives (Shapiro and Bernstein, 2010). Writing about his strong determination, journalist Christopher Gray stated “Mr. Maciunas who lived in the basement of the [80 Wooster] co-op while organizing others, ultimately embedded blades in his door so no one could pound on it. He operated largely without permits and once chased a building inspector into the street with a samurai sword (...). He was really the father of SoHo” (Gray, 1992). By June 1968, he had founded a total of eleven cooperative units in seventeen buildings on Prince Street and Broome Street, and along West Broadway. He acquired 110 Mercer Street together with Nan June Paik and Shigeko Kubota, Yoshimasa Wada, Ayo and Simone Forti. Jean Dupuy and Mary Beth



80 Wooster Street. Photograph by the author. Source: Author's personal collection.

Edelson joined the building community some time later. Hudson specified, “an agreement has been made between the eight owners to share joint responsibilities for central heating, elevators and the maintenance of the building. Thus each party pays a specific sum of money every month into a joint account, from which overall expenses are met. Likewise in the early sixties, Luzio Pozzi moved into Greene Street and Christo into Howard Street” (Hudson, 1987: 37). Thanks to this system, artists were gradually moving into SoHo.<sup>9</sup>

In the late 1960s, Maciunas's sense of community got him into a lot of controversial situations, which eventually led to serious problems with the management of the cooperatives. He had been using the deposit money from all the *Fluxhouses* to the benefit of the entire collective, and this meant that when a cooperative was in danger all the funds from other cooperatives were pooled so that it could be rescued. As a result of this, if one of the co-ops funded needed its investment back, the money was not readily available. Although, initially, his cooperative system had greatly favored the artists' occupation of SoHo, it had turned out to be too weak and unstable, and finally came to an end in 1968 (Simpson, 1981: 153-188). Maciunas's model, however, was to benefit the search for new formulas to merge city and art in the years that followed.

In his book *The Unanticipated City. Loft Conversion in Lower Manhattan*, James R. Hudson examines the changing land use patterns of Lower Manhattan over a thirty-year

9. George Maciunas left SoHo and the city after several problems with the co-ops, and passed away in Massachusetts in 1978. 80 Wooster Street kept the cooperative system and its 11 units occupied by artists at least until 1992 (Gray, 1992).



Fluxhouse Cooperative Building Project. Photograph and Prospectus, 1966. Source: Fluxus Foundation.

period ending in 1987, arguing in the specific case of SoHo that the reuse of post-industrial urban fabric was executed by local culture. He uses the environmental concept of “invasion-succession” to explain the replacement of land use and population occurring in SoHo between 1955 and 1985. His work illustrates the process through which this prolific relationship between art and workspaces was established. In the beginning, smaller loft spaces with lower assessed value were converted into residential spaces, as they were less attractive to manufacturing companies. Hudson states that in 1965 about 87 percent of the conversions were undertaken in lofts of 280 square meters or less—61 percent of loft floors in SoHo were this size (Hudson, 1987: 38). Since the mafias and the police did not view these peaceful artists as intruders, a silent occupation of this area could take place outside the control of the law or gangs. Around 1971, with the approval of the Loft Law, the artist population increased considerably and SoHo also started to attract a non-artist population. In 1965, the median assessed value of a SoHo loft building with some conversion activity was \$45,000, a figure which had increased to \$60,000 by 1987 (Hudson, 1987: 39). Higher-income groups began to move into SoHo replacing the original occupants. As Hudson detected, this “invasion-succession” pattern was consistent with those found in urban residential neighborhoods that had been gentrified. In the 1970s, however, SoHo had not already collapsed under the weight of its own success. It was still a mixed-use area, and an excellent example of the great advantages of “creative clustering” for the obsolete city.

According to Lawrence Alloway, at the beginning of the artistic occupation, “the artists who lived illegally on Broome Street knew scarcely anything about those who were living illegally on Prince or Crosby Street” (Alloway, 1978: 7). In this context, the annual project *10 Downtown. The artist and his work in his studio* would be the first attempt at showing the art activity in SoHo as a “whole” linked to the urban fabric. Every year, a group of artists simultaneously opened their studios to the public for a month in an act of celebration. It was a main collaborative act, in which the importance of a pseudo-democratic participation for the art of this period was made evident. This show could be considered

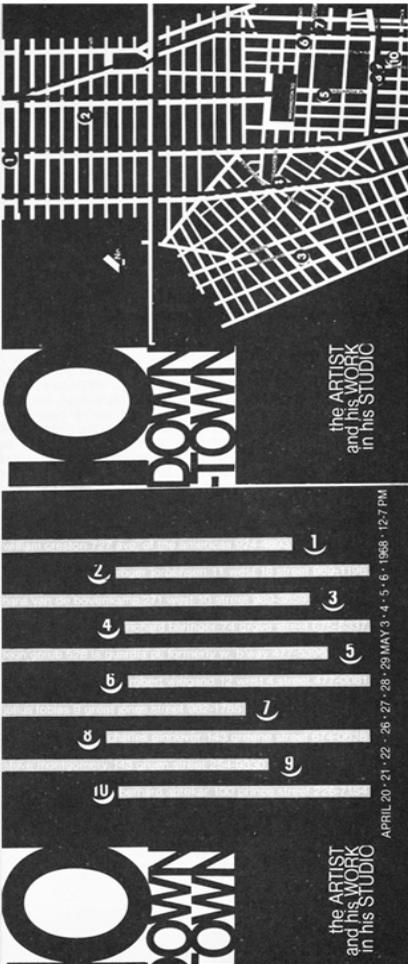
**TEN DOWNTOWN TEN DOWNTOWN**  
 1973 1974 1975 1976 1977 1978 1979 1980 1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 1988 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997 1998 1999 2000

8<sup>th</sup> annual exhibition of artists' work in their lofts

Saturdays	1-6 p.m.	MAY 3	MAY 10	MAY 17
Sundays	1-6 p.m.	MAY 4	MAY 11	MAY 18



- 1 HARRIETT SOSSON  
133 West 24<sup>th</sup> Street
- 2 RON LOHSE  
14 West 32<sup>nd</sup> Street
- 3 GLORIA KLEIN  
144 West Broadway
- 4 JOSEPH GERRY  
71 Sullivan Street
- 5 MERLE LEECH  
27 Greene Street
- 6 MAUREEN CONNOR  
334 Canal Street
- 7 WILLIAM FINLEY  
71-73 Franklin Street
- 8 TOM KENDALL  
117 Mercer Street
- 9 LICIO ISOLANI  
308 Centre Street
- 10 PATRICK LOWERY  
49 East 1<sup>st</sup> Street

the ARTIST and his WORK in his STUDIO

APRIL 20 - 21 - 22 - 28 - 27 - 28 - 29 MAY 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 1968 - 12-7 PM

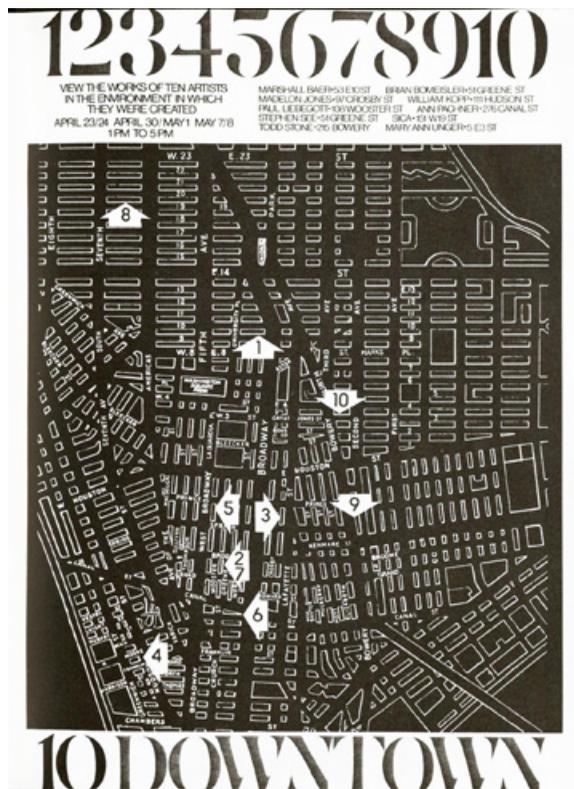
Ten Downtown 1975 and Ten Downtown 1968. Source: *Ten Downtown Ten Years* (1978).

one of the first collective steps toward the dematerialization of the traditional narrative space into the urban context: a cluster of inner spaces linked by invisible threads that became temporarily public, using the streets as corridors in a museum.

### 10 Downtown. The artist and his work in his studio, 1968-1978

This annual event highlighted the connection between the art production and the architecture of the district, thus aiding the cohesion of artists within it. It all began in the spring of 1968 when ten artists opened up their studios to the public and advertised them simultaneously for three weekends, with no mediation from museums or galleries. Artists agreed to work on a collective event where they could share their own spaces of creation, their studios, and any areas in between with the public. Their artworks were displayed in a sort of deconstructed space conformed by private home/work units, revealing how their daily life occurred. This “exhibition of workspaces” showed another stage of the expansion of the artistic field, the transition from an intimate and individual studio space toward a public and collective form that would help to shape the concept of artistic district. The studios were turned inside out, just as had been done earlier with Castelli’s warehouse. However, this time the attempt was collective.

Hans Van de Bovenkamp launched the first show and from that point on each group chose the successors for the following year. Artists had a curatorial role and this annual exhibition revealed the invisible network of contacts among them. This role was more about choosing the SoHo sites that represented current production within this artistic community than about any theme or artistic style which the participants



may have had in common. There were mostly paintings and sculptures, sometimes of large scale, which were more comfortably shown in the studio space. Promotional posters for the event showed that the artistic narrative could not be separated from the urban context. Most of the designs used schemes based on the plans of the city to present the locations where artists concentrated their activity. Every year the pattern of show-sites made public changed in accordance with the selection made by the previous generation of artists in the show. This project was highly successful with 6,000 people attending the event the first year. Its continuity over the next ten years helped to increase the sense of community in SoHo, as well as to promote alternative artistic displays in the City of New York (Alloway, 1998).

Ten Downtown 1973, Ten Downtown 1978. Source: *Ten Downtown Ten Years* (1978).

Local publishers, who were closely related to the *Art & Language* movement, also helped to reinforce this idea of community by publicizing the hidden life of SoHo. The first magazine to appear in this area would be *Avalanche*, later followed by the foundation of art journals *Art Rite* and *The Fox*, as well as the *SoHo Weekly News* (Block, 1976: 23, 25). Rather than prioritizing prestige and status like the old bohemia had done, these artists based their life on a collective and direct relationship with the “work” and the “space.”

### III. Alternative art spaces

It was from the *10 Downtown* project that art critic Lawrence Alloway would provide one of the first definitions of “alternative space” from the art field. In the catalog *10 Downtown 10 Years* published on the occasion of the 10th anniversary exhibition organized by the *Institute for Art and Urban Resources*, he stated that “alternative spaces is a general term referring to the various ways in which artists show their work outside commercial galleries and formally constituted museums. It includes the use of studios as exhibition spaces, the temporary use of buildings for work done on site, and cooperatives of artists, whether for the purpose of putting on one exhibition or for



Aerial Map highlighting the areas where there were alternative art structures, spaces, artists' groups and organizations according to Julie Ault's *Alternative art, New York, 1965-1985: a cultural politics Book for the Social Text Collective*, 1996. Design by the author.

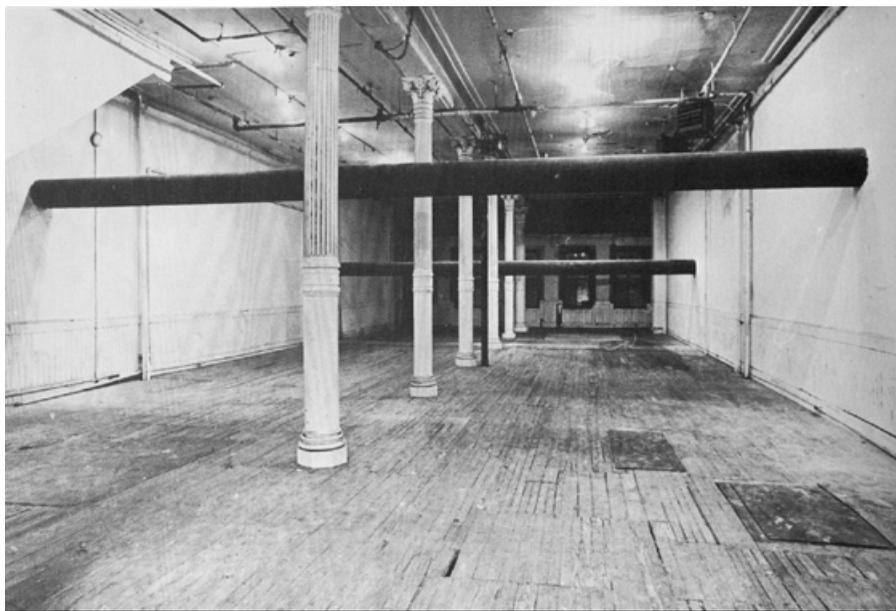
running a gallery on a long-term basis" (Alloway, 1978: 4). Indeed, alternative space was to become the nucleus of the creative clustering occurring in SoHo.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth noting the stark character of the use of the term "space." Space –not theater, scenario, gallery, or studio– was used to refer to a hotspot where the creative act was taking place, just like it was used to designate the numerous cultural emplacements in SoHo. The anonymity of this term, the general nature of its meaning, spoke of the scarcity of formal requirements in art at the time. Only "urban space" –a wide variety of everyday places– would define the motion field of art. Indeed, by running rare and distinctive spaces through new organizational structures, artists paved the way for an alternative to the New York commercial art circuits, as well as founding a strategy for self-referencing within the city.

Art historian Julie Ault has analyzed and compiled evidence on the existence of more than sixty spaces in this period. With the art exhibition *Cultural Economies: Histories from the Alternative Arts Movement, NYC* held in 1996 at *The Drawing Center*, she began a complete study on the alternative structures, spaces, groups and organizations created in New York City between 1965 and 1985. She has conducted one of the most comprehensive studies defining the geographies of art in this period. Without strictly geo-referencing them or paying special attention to their physical appearance, she offers precise accounts of their foundation, ideology and main activity. According to her research, between 1969 and 1973, the first cooperative galleries and alternative spaces –*Bowery, First Street Gallery, Spring Palace, 98 Greene Street, 55 Mercer, 112 Workshop, A.I.R. Gallery, Artists Space* or *Soho 20*– were founded by the counterculture in SoHo.<sup>11</sup> For the 1976 catalog *New York-Downtown Manhattan: SoHo*, Stephen Reichard also highlighted the emergence of several alternative spaces such as *3 Mercer Street Store* (the front half of artist Stefan Eins's street level loft), *Franklin Furnace Artists' Distribution, Inc.* (performer Martha Wilson's small exhibition center and bookstore), *The Kitchen* (a media-oriented artist collective founded by Woody and Steina Vasulka), and the *Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Inc.* (a provider of alternative space acting in the proximities of the area). Thus, through these alternative structures, artists and groups of artists, most of whom were interconnected, gradually created a physical and symbolic place in this central area.

10. *10 Downtown 10 Years* was an exhibition coordinated by Gloria Klein at P.S.1. Institute for Art and Urban Resources, September 11–October 2, 1977.

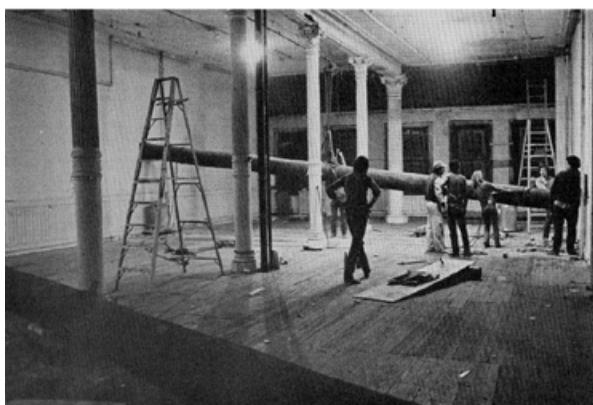
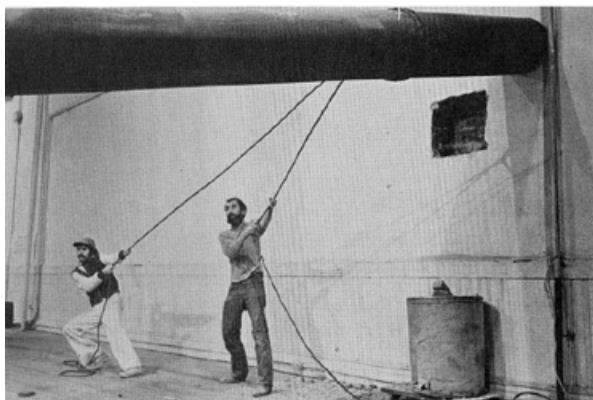
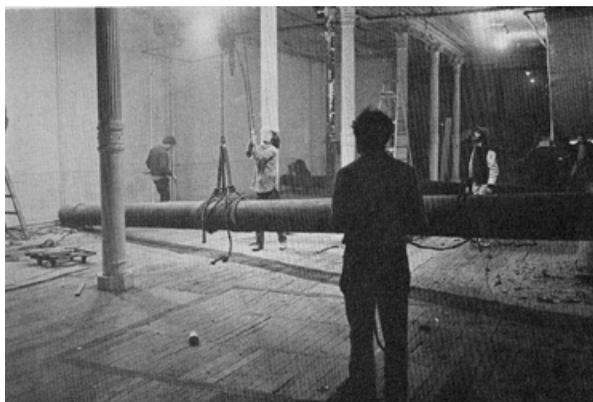
11. Addresses, numbers and designations relating to the space were used in the names of the galleries, demonstrating the importance of location in these alternative structures (Ault, 2002: 17-59).



112 Greene Street, 2014. Photograph by the author. Source: Author's personal collection.

Furthermore, alternative spaces offered different starting conditions. Their malleability and flexibility allowed the artistic narrative to embrace the space and in this regard *112 Greene Street* (1970-1978) would be a paradigm. According to Stephen Reichard's text, *112 Workshop, Inc.* was the best example possible of the essence of an alternative space (1976: 239).<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Lew, its founder, was the first to realize the "raw power" of this space. The material bareness that occurred over time, driving architecture to ruin, was considered the best context for producing art in continuity with life. The unfinished state of this space was almost the complete opposite of the decontextualized, aseptic and neutral context of the "white cube." In such a setting, the work of art could always be in progress, so that the "process", which was a relevant aspect of the art of this period, could prevail over the

12. See also the recent review on *112 Greene Street* by Jessamyn Fiore (2012). *112 Greene Street: The Early Years, 1970-1974*. New York: Radius Books, David Zwirner.



(Two Horizontals), Untitled, 1974 by Jene Highstein. Installation in progress. 112 Greene Street. Source: *112 Workshop, 112 Greene Street: history, artists & artworks* (1981: 242). Courtesy of Ms. Kitty Highstein.

(Two Horizontals), Untitled, 1974 by Jene Highstein. Installation in progress. Assisted by Robert Grosvenor, Suzanne Harris, Richard Nonas and Ned Smyth. 112 Greene Street. Source: *112 Workshop, 112 Greene Street: history, artists & artworks* (1981: 60). Courtesy of Ms. Kitty Highstein.

result. There, where remembrance and oblivion converged, the work could evolve from the workspace. Quoting Robyn Brentano from her 1981 book *112 Workshop, 112 Greene Street: history, artists & artworks*, “if alternative spaces [were] about anything, they [were] about the roots in everyday living and the necessity of everyday living to restore to itself the artist’s inspiration and grace” (Bretano, 1981: xii). The space was manipulated constantly in 112 as it was accessible twenty-four hours a day to the artist community and the spontaneous audience. The collaborative work was something natural that evolved from the physical condition of the space, from its openness and raw quality. This sort of artistic laboratory with blurring boundaries was the cell of the public life of SoHo. Artists stayed and lived there, seeking work that would evolve from real circumstances.

A network of creative spaces of many sorts grew incredibly fast in the first half of the 1970s. Holly and Horace Salomon founded another alternative work and performance space around the same period, *98 Greene Street Loft* (1969-1973), located right next to 112. Artist and SoHo tenant Carol Goodden, in collaboration with Matta-Clark, also created the restaurant *FOOD* (1971-1973), which was built by

regulars of 112. Meetings around the table became a popular form of exchange among artists, as they honored the “art as life” mantra of the time. *A.I.R.* was also founded nearby, at 97 Wooster Street (1972), along with other alternative art places and loft studios with a public vocation.

Moreover, SoHo’s workspaces, large diaphanous rooms where the machinery and materials conditioned the distribution of the space, would influence the concept of art studio-house worldwide. Little decoration was added to loft workspaces and was mostly limited to pieces of furniture that made it possible to maintain the space’s industrial essence –raw materials and bare facilities, as in the case of *112 Greene Street*. The size of the lofts allowed artists to give performances without the need for theaters, museums or galleries. Conversely, the popularity of artists’ lofts would propitiate a new and highly desirable type of domestic space where the functional areas of the house would be minimized and widely opened to a single room. Thus, the flexible model provided by these industrial spaces would also be considered suitable for future contemporary lifestyles based on the decentralization of work from offices to homes. The impact of SoHo would extend far beyond the art scene, as its large and extravagant spaces would quickly be associated with a sophisticated middle-class lifestyle.

The alternative spaces of SoHo influenced both the artistic and the urban scene. On the one hand, it outlined artists’ urban behavior for the generations to follow and it developed a certain specific style for the display of art within the space, which was to have incredible impact on art production. The raw quality of obsolete space made a unique experimentation and transgression of the established boundaries possible –which also increased the symbolic production in the city. On the other hand, the creative clustering of alternative spaces resulted in the reactivation of an entire urban area. The change in land use patterns toward cultural practices orchestrated from these obsolete places promoted greater awareness of the value of existing urban environments, increasing the number of contemporary landmarks. Ultimately, the production of alternative spaces within the cast-iron architecture of SoHo, as well as the art practices that made use of its streets, would become a hitherto unprecedented method for urban reactivation. The artist from these alternative spaces would explore and rediscover the most unknown cityscape.

#### IV. Urban geographies of art

According to Stephen Reichard, SoHo was comprised of three generations of artists: “the revered rear-grade of the early sixties”, “the conceptual and minimal vanguard of the mid-Sixties”, and “the divergent avant-garde of the Seventies.” They all had various ways of relating to industrial space in SoHo, and did so with different degrees of intensity. Artists spread their invisible threads over the raw surfaces of SoHo, from the intimacy of the art studio inserted in the voids left after industrial activity was halted, from the public alternative spaces on the ground floors of these buildings, or from streets and rooftops. Ultimately, the behavior of these artists, as explorers of urban obsolescence in charge of reinterpreting the urban section of New York City would influence artistic procedures and productions throughout the 1970s. They had undeniable impact on the ways in which artists chose to connect between them and with the urban fabric of the city, from the subsoil to the sky.<sup>13</sup>

The alternative interior space for art is already described in the previous epigraphs, however the creative activity of SoHo found further outdoor scenarios that should be also considered. Both, SoHo’s private and public space, would be seen as places that welcomed participative conducts and collective acts. In her article *The Geography of*

13. See María Fernanda Carrascal Pérez, “Otras Arquitecturas Anticipadas: Un recorrido por el subsuelo, suelo y cielo de Nueva York”/ “Other Anticipated Architectures: A Journey Through the subsoil, soil and sky of New York” *Zarch, Las Trazas del Lugar*, nº1 (2013: 270-283).

*Street Time: A Survey of Street Works Downtown*, Lucy Lippard compiled a notable number of artistic interventions citywide (Lippard, 1976: 181-210). The expanded field of art described by Lippard included pavements, streets, gardens, roofs, window spaces, and even political spaces. She referenced how “art was being used indirectly by the capitalist establishment to support wars and exploitation –all of this contributed to the process of ‘decentralization’ into the downtown area,” and she acknowledged that “Many artists and artworkers around 1969 desired some measure of independence from the system, although it should be said that none of us at any time totally abandoned his or her marketplace for the freedom of open shows, picket lines, and street works” (Lippard, 1976: 181). Nevertheless, most of their regular activities were compatible with a sort of “environmental” approach –whether socio-political, aesthetic, or formal. The artist, with a Duchampian vision, was immersed in the urban scenography of SoHo, inquiring about its meaning and reusing its forms and materials.

Before the late 1960s, there had been few attempts of intervention in the public domain. As already noted, with the arrival of the 1970s, the precept of “art as life” changed the way of interpreting the place of the art project, linking it to the ground and daily existence. Moreover, these public settings enhanced the collaborative dimension of artists’ activity. They were wider spaces –flexible, visible and accessible–, in which alliances between artists and contexts occurred naturally. Their surveys and urban actions also questioned aloud the usefulness of the existing city, in what could be considered a critique of the modern functional city. Through the urban performances of the 1970s artists, abandoned buildings, decaying façades, empty roofs, streets, squares and bridges took on new meaning. Thus, urban space hosted and motivated the collective work of art, and art returned to the city its most forgotten and disconnected places through a new symbolic production on-site.

As Lippard noted in her writings, there was a project that especially addressed the public vocation of the art of this period: *Street Works* (Lippard, 1976: 183). In 1969, critic John Perreault, artist Marjorie Strider and visual poet Hannah Weiner organized five series of urban performances on New York streets, four of which were open to the public. Many actions were individual explorations outlining everyday behavior or working alongside the natural dynamics of the city, without changing the course of street life. This project involved a variety of artists, including Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Jacki Apple, Arakawa Scott Burton, Meredith Monk, Anne Waldman, Les Levine, Adrian Piper, Charles Simonds, Minoru Yoshida, Martha Wilson, and also Lippard. The supplement to the publication *0 to 9*, issue 6 (July 6, 1969), edited by Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer, was dedicated to *Street Works I, II and III* which took place on March 15, April 18 and May 25. It accurately described these situations “using streets, walking, running, looking and identifying.”<sup>14</sup> According to Lippard’s article, this *Street Work Series*, together with the *Judson Dance Theater* of Greenwich Village, which operated inside the scenic space of a vacant church in Washington Square Park, were the most important sources of performance art.<sup>15</sup> There was also a *Street Works IV*, which was part of a series sponsored by the Architectural League, and a *Street Works V*, which considered *World Works*, inviting people around the world to choose a street and act on it (Lippard, 1976: 183).

A year after the first street work, artist Trisha Brown also performed on one of the roofs on Greene Street, *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* at her house in 80 Wooster Street. In 1971, she created her first *Roof Piece* with twelve dancers placed on ten rooftops between 53 Wooster Street and 381 Lafayette (Aderson, 2011: 202). Other examples of works in public spaces were the projects for the Hudson River by Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark, *Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan* (1970) and *Islands parked on the Hudson* (1970-71) respectively. The similarity of the proposals for this stretch of water appeared to be the result of a shared concern for extending the life of the grid (Breitwieser, 1997: 15).

14. This is a summary of the titles that Vito Acconci gave to the texts describing his street works on April 18 and March 15, 1969, in the supplement to its magazine *0 to 9*, Supplement Number six (July, 1969) (Barcelona: MACBA Collection. Reg No, A2225).

15. The Judson Church (1838-) was founded to convert and help the Italian community and other communities in need in the area. Starting with Edward Judson’s gospel singing and moving picture shows, it became an autonomous art focus in the 1950s with the Judson Arts Ministry set up to help artists in the area. The main necessity for this group was to be “space,” space in which to create and show their work. It offered gallery space to Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, or Robert Rauschenberg, then unknown artists. In the 1960s, it would become the first home to the ‘happenings’ movement. See “*Guide to the Judson Memorial Church Archive, 1838-1995* (New York: The Fales Library, Special Collection NYU). <http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/fales/judson/bioghist.html> (accessed Jun 5, 2011).



Map highlighting the locations of artists' lofts and artistic interventions around SoHo in the 1970s. Design by the author.

Lippard would also highlight other similar projects. This is the case of the works of Laurie Anderson (with her *Institutional Dream Series*, 1972), Douglas Huebler (with his street exchange pieces, 1971); Adrian Piper (with her *Catalysis Pieces*, 1970); Charles Simonds (with his minuscule towns in ruins placed over streets and walls of vacant lots, 1970). “Street works tend to take two forms –impermanent physical objects or remains, and performances which last only as long as the action and, ideally, leave no pollution behind” (Lippard, 1976: 189). She highlighted the graphic street works over city pavements of Kaltenbach (*Trash Poems* on sidewalks, 1969), Les Levine (“dirty words” over 42nd Street), Colette (SoHo’s sidewalk pieces in personalized “morse code”, 1969), Ralston Farina (flour clouds and snowstorms at the intersection of West Broadway and Spring Street, 1969), Zadick Zadikian (yellow billboard on Varick Street, 1974), Carol Kinne (series of circular color abstraction for the Broadway-Lafayette area, 1976), Robert Janz (*Six Sticks, Pedagogical Sketchbook* in downtown New York, 1975), or Daniel Buren (*Seven Ballets in Manhattan* in seven different neighborhoods including SoHo, 1975). She also addressed several attempts to work in vacant lots, a frequent artistic stage at the time. Matta-Clark’s performance *Jacks* (1971), Les Levine’s *Process of Elimination* (1969), or Richard Serra’s unsuccessful attempt to erect a large sculpture in an empty lot on West Broadway below Canal Street (1974), were some of the projects linked to the obsolete and neglected space of the city (Lippard, 1976: 197, 199, 201).

These works, which were either centered in SoHo or conceived by artists from SoHo, ultimately influenced the concept of “public”. They fostered a general interest in making on-site works widely accessible to citizens and empowered artists so that they could get involved in the creation of their live contexts. In this regard, the idea of “public art” –not just that of memorials and pedestals– would be further cultivated in this decade, and the idea of “public space” would also be questioned and rethought.

THE BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN  
 Percy E. Sutton, President  
 COMMUNITY BOARD NO. 2

NOTICE TO TENANTS WITHIN THE AFFECTED AREA

The City Planning Commission and the Board of Estimate have adopted new zoning regulations for SoHo and NoHo (M1-5A and M1-5B on map below). These regulations, detailed below, are effective as of April 27, 1976.

Conversions to Living-Work Quarters for Artists

In M1-5A and M1-5B Districts, any building with lot coverage not greater than 5,000 sq. ft. may be converted to living-work quarters for artists\*, with the following limitations:

Buildings fronting on Broadway may only be converted if the lot coverage does not exceed 3,600 sq. ft.

In M1-5B Districts:

- No basement or first floor conversions to living-work quarters for artists are permitted, except as modified below.
- No second floor conversions to living-work quarters for artists are permitted in buildings over 3,600 sq. ft., except as modified below. (Second floor conversions are permitted in buildings under 3,600 sq. ft.)

In M1-5A Districts, in buildings over 3,600 sq. ft. no basement, first or second floor conversions to living quarters are permitted, except as modified below.

No living-work quarters for artists may be less than 1,200 sq. ft. in size, except where there is only one such loft per floor.

Notification to tenants of SoHo. April 27, 1976. Source: Author's personal collection.

## V. Learning from SoHo

The initial spirit of SoHo began to decay as wealthier tenants gradually replaced the population of artists and as the area was increasingly frequented by tourism. When developers and merchants set their sights on this area, the idea of a “new geography” of art within the urban obsolete space of the city –an urban arena for cultural innovation– began to dissipate. As these spaces gradually ceased to be ruins, possibilities for interaction and experimentation were considerably diminished. Although the SoHo phenomenon was fleeting, it would remain alive until the end of the decade and it would have a legacy.

In 1976 René Block already observed that the cadence was: “many new restaurants and boutiques appearing on one hand, many artists quitting on the other. The property owners and real estate sharks are the ones reaping the harvest. Lawyers and doctors are rushing to take over the vacant lofts. It is cool –as it was once for the artists– to live illegally in SoHo. And rents continue to rise”, he added, “One can only hope that the

rapid kaleidoscope of events will soon attract public interest to other objects” (1976: 29). As James R. Hudson stated, given that SoHo was not a residential area originally, it did not follow the usual process of residential invasion and succession. Nonetheless, following occupation there were some common consequences: local businesses were replaced by other establishments to serve the new population, and tourists began to visit this cultural epicenter regularly. A great number of commercial galleries opened to display the work of local artists and specialist shops subsequently opened to supply these spaces. As early as at the turn of the 1970s, Maciunas’s *Fluxhouses* experienced severe problems: the low-income residents had special assessments for unforeseen costs that could not be covered, and Maciunas’s management involved internal transactions that caused a severe rift among the cooperatives. At this point, however, the government began to realize the virtues that the promotion of culture could bring to the city. New laws and regulations were created to facilitate the artists’ integration within this neighborhood. SoHo went back to being an economic engine as it had been in its industrial years and, furthermore, it meant an innovative formula for the reactivation of the obsolete city.

“Soho-ism” was certainly a cultural and urban phenomenon which had short-term consequences, like the creation of a meaningful artistic community or the quick reactivation of a central area in New York, and long-term effects, like the creation of development patterns on which creators and cities would rely in the future.<sup>16</sup> The procedures and laws derived from the SoHo experience would be some of the resulting durable connections between art and city in this period. Such was the case of the *Loft Law*. The occupation of a loft was initially considered in terms of a commercial landlord-tenant relationship in which the tenants did not usually have valid leases or had prejudicial commercial leases or leases that were subject to negotiation by the individual parties. As the Multiple Dwelling Law (MDL) did not regulate these contracts, the spaces were not kept in good repair and residents were left to deal with the cost of conversions. In response to this situation, in 1964 the New York State Legislature decided to create a bill for regulating the use of lofts by artists, allowing them to inhabit joint living and work spaces (Article 7B of the MDL). However, this regulation established several conditions, most notably: (1) the artists’ occupancy was permitted in commercial buildings of cities of more than one million persons engaged in the art world; (2) under any circumstance, residential and artistic use were compatible with commercial uses; (3) and the spaces had to meet minimum quality standards (regarding fire, health, air and light).<sup>17</sup> These requirements limited the loft conversions to very few cases. Therefore, the legislature amended Article 7B in 1971 to allow artists to coexist with commercial enterprises. In the particular case of New York City, the zoning amendments allowed artists to live in light manufacturing spaces (dual purpose quarters) measuring 335 square meters or less in the area of SoHo. However, in order for these artists to be protected by law, their buildings had to have a certificate of occupancy that guaranteed the minimum habitability requirements established by this article regarding fire and health standards, which did not usually happen (Eckstein, 1981: 511-540). Given that many artists were living in buildings with no certification, SoHo hosted a great number of illegal tenants unprotected by the law, who were highly vulnerable to the real estate market trends.

When the project for the Lower Manhattan Expressway was finally rejected by Mayor Lindsay in 1969, this area acquired a new value for the Real Estate sector.<sup>18</sup> *The increasing rents, together with the unsuccessful cooperative system, caused artists to leave SoHo pushed by the arrival of higher-income residents. The approval of two new zoning amendments in 1976 was aimed at minimizing the expulsion of artists from Lower Manhattan. The first amendment allowed the expansion of loft conversion toward NoHo, restricting residence just for artists who could use spaces of less than 465 square meters in manufacturing buildings,*

16. René Block refers to this artistic urban phenomenon as “SoHo-ism” (Block, 1976: 29).

17. There was still a considerable number of blue-collar workers in SoHo. The authorities were aware of the mutually beneficial relationship of artists and manufacturers, and they decided to preserve it (Eckstein, 1981: 533).

18. According to architect Shael Shapiro and Charles R. Simpson, the shadow of Robert Moses’s project of the Lower Manhattan Expressway over the area had facilitated Maciunas’s process since city planners and real estate agents had underestimated the value of this area. In Charles R. Simpson, “The Achievement of Territorial Community,” 153-188.



Brochure announcing Lower Manhattan Expressway, 1967-1972. Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

*while the ground floors and basements were reserved to industry. The second amendment determined that lofts in Tribeca were to be used for general residents.*

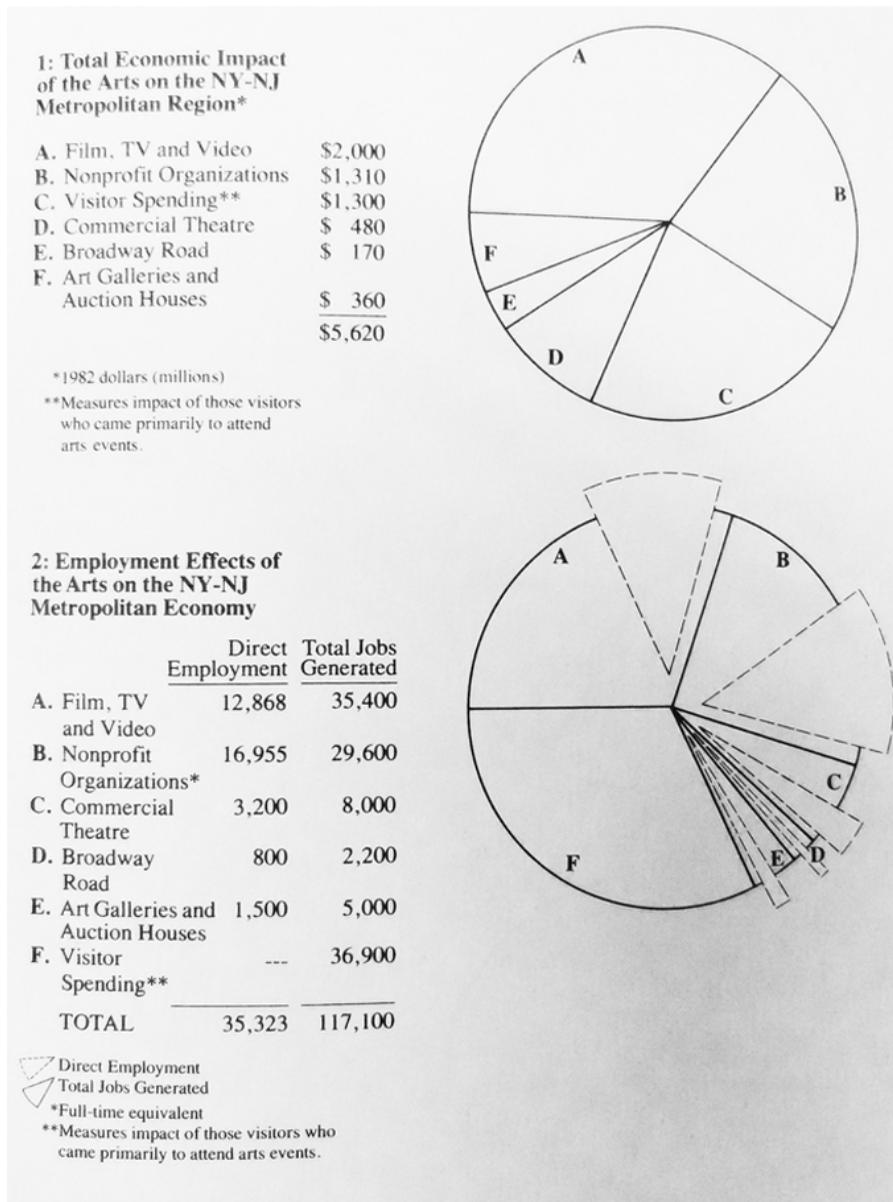
The approach that New York City has taken to loft conversion law reflects a diversity of interests. City officials wanted to maintain an environment conducive to the existence of an art community in the city. Initially, this meant that efforts were directed toward providing artists with affordable dual work and living space. At the same time, city officials wanted to maintain the existence of local industry and the housing needs of artists were balanced with the necessity of preserving industrial activity in lower Manhattan. Later, the housing shortage which arose in New York City made the conversion of lofts to residences an expedient method of augmenting existing housing stock although the city did restrict certain neighborhoods to artists.

William Eckstein, "An Evaluation of New York Loft Conversion Law", *Fordham Urban Law Journal* (1981: 532).

*By 1977, as a measure to improve the housing market at a time of crisis, it was added that any type of tenant could reside in lofts and that loft conversion was open to many districts and manufacturing areas in the city. These facts meant that the end of SoHo as an alternative artistic arena was imminent. SoHo was an outstanding cultural success until the mix of industrial and commercial original and rooted uses, new creative practices, and new residential conversions were no longer balanced.*

In addition to these regulations being tangible evidence of artists' time in this area, SoHo pioneered a process that was to influence the goals of other cultural structures throughout this decade. On the one hand, the "art district", and SoHo as its prime example, embodied a new economic and urban model. It tested a process of economic reactivation based on what would become known as "Cultural Industry", which relied on "culture" as one of the main economic driving forces of a city, with all that this implies. The cluster of alternative activities initiated by the collaboration of different artists as they were leaving was transformed into lucrative business based on creativity. In 1983, the report *The Arts as an Industry: Their Economic Importance to the New York-New Jersey Metropolitan Region* would reveal the definitive economic potential of this sector in the city.<sup>19</sup> The quick economic resur-

19. The first report on the financial impact of the arts in New York City was *The Arts as an Industry: Their Economic Importance to the New York-New Jersey Metropolitan Region*. New York: Port Authority, 1983, which disclosed the good economic rapport between the arts and the city at the end of the decade.



Graphics from the economic report *The Arts as an Industry, 1983*. Source: *The Arts as an Industry: Their Economic Importance to the New York-New Jersey Metropolitan Region (1983)*.

gence of SoHo was a guarantee of success which also opened up possibilities for other obsolete areas and buildings owned by private landlords or public agencies throughout the city to artists. Nonetheless, SoHo ultimately showed how artists' urban behavior could produce a creative economy which could also just as easily be regenerative –when balanced with the local economy and population–, as destructive –when solely prioritizing highly profitable activities. Over and above the negative aspects –subsequent gentrification processes of adjacent residential areas, later expulsion of artists with fewer economic resources, excessive thematization around culture and design, etc.– which have already been largely discussed in other debates, SoHo set a precedent in the involvement of art in city development.

From an architectural perspective, artists, undeniably, began a process for the restoration of the obsolete space of the original SoHo, acknowledging its virtues regarding, location, size, materiality or memory. Before dramatic “successions” could occur, the accumulation of individual artistic “invasions” actually provoked a social and urban renaissance of the whole district. Artists' clustering, in an incipient stage prior to awakening market interest in a place, proved to be a model for the urban reactivation of major areas. The experience of SoHo ultimately legitimized the temporary recycling of existing spaces through art and culture in a period of



Westbeth, 2014. Photograph by the author. Source: Author's personal collection.

*crisis. Furthermore, SoHo also encouraged the involvement of artists with public space. Their spontaneous activity on streets and the openness of their private spaces were also seen as a way of upgrading and enhancing the collective experience in cities, in turn influencing both the conception of "public art" in this decade and future mechanisms for its promotion.*

*On the other hand, SoHo also represented a symbolic act. It gave weight to an increasing concern regarding "heritage" conservation, since "art workers" put outstanding workspaces, the "industrial cathedrals" of America, in the spotlight. Since the 1965 Landmark Law was passed, the Landmark Preservation Commission had worked tirelessly to establish the legal framework for the protection of buildings and areas worth saving, proceeding to speed up the designation of a great number of them as landmarks in the 1970s. Thus, the official designation of SoHo as a Historic District in 1973 was an important step toward the preservation of the "forest of symbols" of New York City, also highlighting the importance of creative agents in processes of this sort. Such commitment to the cast-iron architecture, the modern ruin and the cityscape itself would be broadly adopted by the art world.*

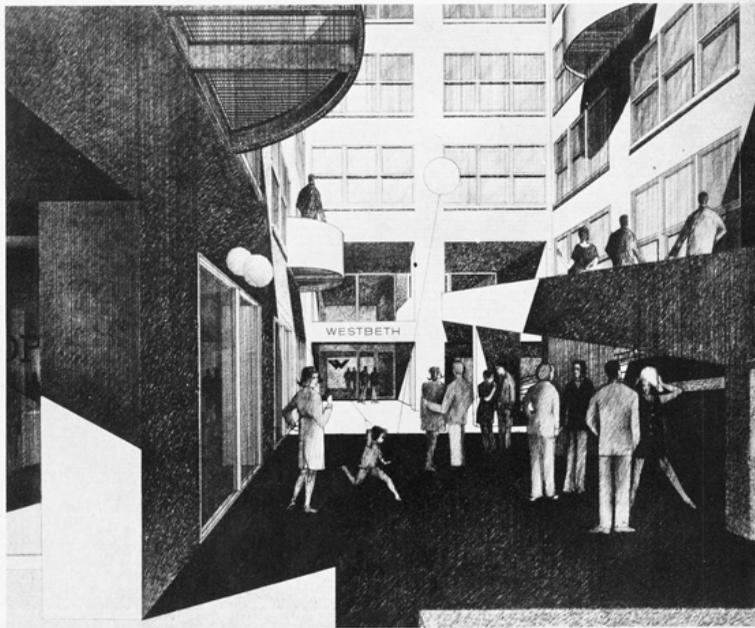
There was a project that immediately emerged from the spirit of SoHo, also concerned with the provision of a platform for the participation of artists and the reutilization of existing constructions worth saving. The proposal for *Westbeth Artists' Housing* was developed between 1969 and 1970 by architect Richard Meier and promoted by the Kaplan Fund, which had initially backed Maciunas's *Fluxhouses* a few years earlier. This was an early attempt at codifying the SoHo phenomenon and transforming it into a formal program. This celebrated project was the largest adaptation of an existing industrial building for artistic and residential use in the country. The repurposed construction had been the headquarters of Bell Laboratories from 1868 until 1966, when this major research center moved to a new location in New Jersey. The article published in *Architectural Record* under the title *Westbeth's rehabilitation project: a clue to improving our cities* (March 1970) further supported the utopia initiated by SoHo that art could serve as an urban revitalizer. *Westbeth* became another piece of living proof of the need for new codes and

## Westbeth's rehabilitation project: a clue to improving our cities



Westbeth Artists Housing is one of the few recent projects to provide additional housing units in New York City, and one of the largest and most complex rehabilitation projects in the country. Westbeth can be called a generative experiment in both the financing and physical reclamation problems which occur in rehabilitating an existing structure for residential use. Designed by Richard Meier, the renovation has turned a square block of old buildings in Greenwich Village (formerly used as laboratories and warehouses) into some 384 new apartments for working artists and their families. Painters and sculptors are eligible to live there, as well as photographers, dancers, composers, actors, musicians, singers, writers and, yes, architects too.

Before the present site in Greenwich Village became available, the J. D. Kaplan Fund and the National Council on the Arts had been searching for several years for the proper buildings to house a large-scale living and working complex for artists. They recognized that a growing problem among New York artists was trying to maintain both living quarters and a studio; increasingly higher rents make such arrangements impossible for all but the established artists.



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Article "Westbeth's rehabilitation project: a clue to improving our cities," *Architectural Record* (March 1970). Source: *Architectural Record* (March 1970).

regulations in the field of urban rehabilitation, advancing the coming amendments regarding industrial spaces and implementing enabling legislation under which the city was able to establish special zoning for other areas (such as the Theater district or the South Street Seaport). After the project's implementation and few years after SoHo's designation as a Historic District, the building was also declared a National Historic Landmark (1975) for the sake of the preservation of this city's "symbolic forest".<sup>20</sup> The Kaplan Fund was to be an invaluable presence in the "cross-dialogue on space" held by the city and art in the following years.

The fact that the city had allowed this artistic cluster to be created in a meaningful existing workspace was a palpable testimony of its increasing interest in this type of processes. Conscious of the lack of funds to create these artistic quarters ex novo, New York City officials inspired by SoHo and *Westbeth* began to promote other mechanisms using different kind of existing spaces and involving private landlords. The case of the Manhattan Plaza, for instance, came along few years later. Architect David Todd designed it as a luxury complex between Ninth and Tenth Avenues on West

20. Today, *Westbeth* is one of the last remaining bastions and reminders of the artistic life of the 1970s in downtown Manhattan. Even though the complex was thought up as a place for beginners, many who arrived never left. The complex, which continues to have a long waiting list, has kept its artist tenants, an older population which still contributes to the New York art scene. At present, *Westbeth* has a number of problems stemming from its lengthy 45 years of life (Robledo, 2010).



Visitors at Galleries on west Broadway. Photograph by Susan Weiley, 1974. Source: *New York-Downtown Manhattan: SoHo* (1976: 98).

43rd Street in order to revalue Times Square, which was an unsafe and conflictive area at the time. When this complex of 46 stories, 1,688 units and about 3,500 tenants was finished in 1973 the developers, fully immersed in a period of recession, were unable to find occupants for the whole building. Since the City of New York had contributed to its funding, the decision was made to offer the vacant units for artists' housing using federal subsidies. Therefore, it was established that 70% of these apartments were to be set aside for performing artists and the remaining 30% for local residents. Manhattan Plaza hides one of the richest histories on the New York of the late 1970s.<sup>21</sup>

The learning from SoHo experience, its artistic and urban practices and participatory procedures already tested in these subsequent projects previously mentioned, would also inspire the activity of innovative art organizations in New York City, beyond the limits of this neighborhood. Such was the case of the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, the Public Art Fund or Creative Time Inc.<sup>22</sup> Although the history of such a legacy cannot be further developed in this article, from its early great impact, it could be concluded that any subsequent alliances between art and city would learn from SoHo that artists should have a better place in the development of the future city, in its symbolic production and in the invention of the creative arena for a post-modern society. The case of SoHo, ultimately, raised this collaborative art to a high social and urban purpose, as the suitable agent for the social reactivation of the most obsolete cityscape.

21. Official Website of Miracle on 42nd Street on the Manhattan Plaza project, <http://miracleon42ndstreet.org/home> (accessed July 12, 2015).

22. See author's doctoral dissertation, "City and Art: Cross-dialogues on Space. New York in the 1970s". Universidad de Sevilla, 2015.

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